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SUBJECT: INVERTING THE INTERNATIONAL INTERFERENCE PARADIGM:
AFGHAN WOMEN SEEK SUPPORT

¶1. (U) Summary: According to a series of meetings Embassy officials have held with Afghan women in Kabul, they are generally in favor of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and cited many positive changes that have occurred in their lives since the fall of the Taliban. Many women's rights activists believe the international forces have provided them the space they need to promote development, improve access to education, and advance women's rights. While many women are skeptical that a troop increase alone would have a positive impact, they support increased international assistance in development and social areas. Female interlocutors have praised the effectiveness of international aid put directly into the hands of local communities, both through microloans to women and via the National Solidarity Program. They also pointed to increased awareness of and access to shelters for domestic violence victims as signs of positive changes for Afghan women. However, some Kabul women have become increasingly concerned by the deteriorating security situation in the city; they look to both the international community and their own security forces for help. End Summary.

On Troops: Women Want More Soft Power

¶2. (U) While former MP Malalai Joya is touring the United States and Canada promoting her new biography and calling for the removal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan, women in Kabul are sending a different message. Most women with whom Embassy officers have spoken over the past two months - from NGO directors to the residents of shelters for victims of domestic violence - support the U.S. military and civilian presence in Afghanistan.

¶3. (U) While female Afghan interlocutors in Kabul are not in favor of a never-ending military presence and are uncertain about a troop increase, they have spoken extensively of their continued need for U.S. security and particularly economic assistance during meetings with U.S. officials. Kabul women have told Embassy officials repeatedly that the U.S. and international community presence in Afghanistan gives women opportunities that they would never have been granted under the Taliban. According to these women, the protection the international forces provide allows women and girls to attend school; to work outside the home; to serve in the government; to be protected from domestic violence; and generally to participate more fully in their society beyond the confines of a compound. Indeed, some women fear that a rapid withdrawal of international forces would force women back indoors, out of public life.

¶4. (SBU) Orzala Ashraf Nemat, an independent human rights activist, told PolOff: "If the international community left Afghanistan now, everything would collapse. Things might be moving slowly, but I really do believe we have gained something." However, she was unsure of the impact of sending

additional troops. "If there were one soldier for every Afghan in the country, that is still not what would win the war. What is really needed is a legitimate government."

¶5. (SBU) Leeda Yaqoubi, Deputy Director of Afghan Women's Network, said she would prefer to see international assistance invested in development rather than more troops. Specifically, she listed schools, factories, job creation, and women's empowerment as areas where the international community should increase its support. She also recommended the international community create a better mechanism to support the Afghan National Security Forces, rather than spending money to increase the number of foreign troops in the country. Yaqoubi suggested cities remain under the control of the ANSF, while international troops deploy to secure Afghanistan's borders. This comment echoes many Afghans concern that the real danger to security in Afghanistan stems from Pakistan, not Afghanistan.

On Development: Give the Money to the People

¶6. (SBU) Female parliamentarians and underserved urban women alike are supportive of "international interference" in the form of development aid that skips over corrupt Afghan government mechanisms and is given to the Afghan people at the community level. Fatana Gailani, director of Afghanistan Women Council (AWC) and a staunch Karzai critic passionately described how all foreign aid should completely bypass the "corrupt government." In an October gathering of approximately twenty women who had received small loans or training from AWC, the women demonstrated the long-term effect a small amount of funding can have on an uneducated Afghan woman's life.

¶7. (U) With 28 percent of Afghans naming "lack of job opportunities for women" as the biggest problem facing Afghan women, the AWC program alumnae's gratitude for the training that allowed them to support their families was not a surprise. (Comment: According to a recent Asia Foundation survey of Afghan people, the percentage of Afghans who name lack of employment opportunities as the number one problem facing women has increased from 1 percent to 28 percent since ¶2006. This may signify an increased desire for women to work outside of the home. While this is likely due to economic circumstances and the need for women to work, it could lead to a broader cultural shift. End comment.)

¶8. (SBU) At the meeting with AWC program graduates, a Kabul widow and recipient of an AWC loan described how she had spent the grant money: she started a business with her son to buy, repair, and resell damaged cars. She had paid back her loan and her income is now substantial enough to support her family. A young woman who used her loan to start a small vegetable canning business spoke proudly about how she "can now do things like a man, and is not afraid to go outside." While not all of the women shared the same successes (the wife of a disabled man explained that she had given her microloan to her 11-year old son to start selling things on the street), many of them do continue to attend literacy and skills classes. They are driven to continue to better their and, to them more importantly, their families' lives. As nearly half (49 percent) of all Afghans listed lack of education as the biggest problem facing women, it is important that AWC connects literacy training with their vocational programming. The women were thankful for AWC's financial support and encouraged the international community to continue to direct aid to the people of Afghanistan.

¶9. (SBU) Similarly, female MPs from Kabul, Badghis, and Badakhshan praised a development program where rural Afghan communities are empowered to "identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects." Fawzia Nasseryar (Kabul, Tajik) attributed the success of the National Solidarity Program to the decision making process local communities conduct in order to implement projects. Sabrina

Saqeb (Kabul, Tajik) enthusiastically described how better decisions on funding, construction, and road-building are made when women are involved in the process. Their overwhelming approval of the partially-USAID funded program demonstrated their continued need for international development assistance.

On Domestic Violence: Providing a Safe Home

¶10. (SBU) According to data from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, overall violence against women has decreased this year. There were 1,708 reported cases of violence against women between January and September 2009, versus 2,322 during the same period in 2008. However, the directors of two women's shelters in Kabul told Embassy officials that the number of female victims of domestic violence referred by police to shelters has increased over the past year. While some women are still sent to jail for "running away from home," the increased police referrals is a positive sign that police training on domestic violence issues has been effective. INL-funded programs have trained 125 female police, thirty of whom work in "family response units," which are located in police stations and respond to crimes against women.

¶11. (SBU) At Women for Afghan Women's (WAW) "Family Guidance Center" (FGC) in Kabul women who had been abused by their male relatives live, eat, cook and take classes together. They live as a family, affectionately protecting and encouraging the younger residents. FGC residents vary from an eight year old girl who was sold into marriage at age five to an Iranian grandmother who was trafficked across the border with her daughter.

¶12. (SBU) The shelter's newest resident is a teenage girl from Uruzgan who was regularly beaten by her husband and his family for the several years they were married. The girl, Bibi Aisha, eventually ran away. Instead of receiving help, the police took her to the women's prison in Kandahar. Bibi's father rescued her from prison and returned her to her husband's home, where the abuse continued. To punish Bibi for running away and bringing shame on her family, the husband beat her to the brink of death, cut her nose and ears off, and left her to die. She was eventually brought to the U.S. Special Forces base in Uruzgan, where she was given the medical care she needed. The PRT in Uruzgan coordinated Bibi's transfer to WAW's Kabul shelter in early November, where she is finally living in one of few Afghan safe havens

for victims of domestic violence. (Note: There are currently only 11 shelters throughout Afghanistan.)

¶13. (SBU) Embassy officials recently visited the shelter and listened to women's stories of abuse. All of the women expressed their gratitude to WAW for protecting them. A young Pashtun woman from Kandahar implored international donors to open more shelters in other areas of the country to house women victims of violence (Note: INL is currently funding organizations to open new shelters in Faryab, Badghis, and Kunduz.) WAW-run Family Guidance Centers focus on counseling family members and aim to eventually place women back in their homes. The women at the Kabul shelter explained to Embassy officials that once they return home they will work to educate their extended families and communities about women's rights to education and a life free of abuse.

On Security: Increasing Violence Affects Women

¶14. (SBU) While women mainly spoke confidently of the increasing rights they have gained, several also addressed the issue of deteriorating security in conversations with Embassy officials. According to one woman who had received skills training from AWC, security concerns have increased in

Kabul to the point where some women are afraid to send their children to school. From January 1, 2006 through October 15, 2009, there were 58 suicide attacks in Kabul City, versus only nine suicide attacks between 2002 and 2005. While the city remains safer than many other areas of the country, some women we interviewed view the increased number of these attacks as a sign that the Afghan government and international community are not following through on their many promises.

¶15. (SBU) The deteriorating security situation has also affected civil society. According to Orzala Ashraf Nemat, the lead up to the November 19th inauguration was "less secure than before the elections." While this fear was not supported by fact, there was notable silence from many civil society actors during October and early November. Nemat said the hush stemmed both from security concerns and the feeling that "anything civil society said would be hijacked" by a particular politician for his own personal use. (Comment: If the security situation were to continue to threaten civil society into silence, Afghanistan would risk losing the force that has been most active in nudging the country towards an effective democracy.)

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) Progress on women's rights in Afghanistan continues to advance at a snail's pace. However, women in Kabul appear proud of the progress they have made in increasing women's awareness of their rights and promoting development. They recognize that these advancements could not have been made without international support, and repeatedly emphasized their continued need for assistance from the international community. The Embassy will continue to support Afghan women through increased funding to women's organizations and by encouraging civil society to continue to play an active role in pressuring the government to support women's rights. USAID expects to spend over \$93 million of FY 2009 funds on programs benefitting women and girls in Afghanistan, a significant increase from the \$78 million spent of FY 2008 funds.
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